



No. 10: Reaching out to the wider community

Introduction

Many civic societies were formed in the 1950s and 60s in response to concerns about what was happening to our cities, towns and villages as a result of post-war development. Many fine buildings were being demolished to make way for modern schemes that were often disliked or thought to be ill-conceived and town planners were seen as threatening the survival of the country's built heritage. There was also concern about the amount of street clutter that was regarded as despoiling the look and feel of our built environment. It was the coming together of like-minded individuals who were willing to challenge the intentions of developers and planners that led to the setting up of local societies with the express intention of preserving that heritage while campaigning for the very best quality of design and construction in new schemes.

The challenge today

Today's civic societies are faced with many challenges: not least of these is the need to be able to demonstrate that they continue to have broad engagement with all sectors of their local community, but communities which are now very differently constituted than was the case 50 years ago. Not only should this broader reach help to promote and maintain an interest in the work that societies do, but it should also emphasise their relevance as active stakeholders in helping to shape the places in which people live and work.

Civic societies need to engage with their local communities in four ways:

- i. Taking steps to ensure that civic society membership reflects the make up of their wider community. This also applies to the committee and officer posts within the society.
- ii. Thinking about how their activities or services might be accessed by people from across the community, including those who may have special needs.
- iii. Taking steps to solicit the views of stakeholders across the community to better understand the local context.
- iv. Reaching out to the wider community to stimulate an interest in the public realm.

These topics are enlarged upon below. Many societies will already be doing at least some of the things suggested above. Whether or not you are, one good practice to adopt is to appoint specific individuals on your committee to take on responsibility for each activity. It will be their role to be alert to the implications of what you are doing and to champion the needs of the wider community or minority groups and to challenge the rest of the committee where appropriate. They could also undertake research on how other organisations provide services or interact with the wider community.

Challenge

Rationale

i. Taking steps to ensure that civic society membership reflects the make up of their wider community. This also applies to the committee and officer posts within the society.

To be sustainable, civic societies need to ensure that they have members who are willing to be active in the management of the society as well as participating in the society's activities. Recognising that most societies rely entirely on volunteers, it will be necessary to share the workload among a group of people and to be clear about who has overall responsibilities for leading on certain issues.

It is important, therefore, that societies are able to recruit from their members people who have the necessary enthusiasm and commitment to be able to undertake the work involved. More than this, the knowledge and skills vested in committee members and other post holders need to be shared and transferred to others within the society to allow for future handover of responsibilities to new committee members over time.

Societies therefore need to appeal to a wide membership base. This is best done through active recruitment campaigns, professionally produced literature, advertising or promoting the society widely across the community and using modern communication methods, such as email and the internet.

ii. Thinking about how their activities or services might be accessed by people from across the community, including those who may have special needs.

Societies need to appeal to all sectors of their community. The challenges faced by a large city will be very different from those faced by a small village society. However, some of the considerations will be similar.

Could members of the public with disabilities access information provided by the society? Could they attend events organised by the society? Does the membership include people from a wide age range? Are activities offered that are targeted specifically at young people, or people from ethnic minority communities?

Ideas societies might consider include developing a web site (but make sure the design is compatible with assistive technologies – special software used by people who have, for example, visual impairments, or that you have text only version); provide audio tape versions of leaflets and other publications.

Ensure venues used for meetings are accessible by disabled people, have hearing loops, etc. If offering refreshments, consider people who might have special dietary requirements. Be alert to the dates of religious

festivals that might be observed by members of your community: religious observance might mean that they cannot attend your event if you choose a date that coincides with one of these festivals.

It may also be necessary to provide interpreters for some activities or signers when addressing people with hearing difficulties. Consider producing literature in alternative languages.

It is important to note that it is increasingly a requirement of any organisation applying for funding, that they can demonstrate a clear track record of engaging the whole community in their activities.

iii. Taking steps to solicit the views of stakeholders across the community to better understand the local context. If your society claims to represent the interests of the community, have you engaged with a range of stakeholders to understand their views? This could include local businesses, charitable organisations, minority groups, etc.

You might wish to consider public meetings, surveys, one-to-one interviews, confidential briefings, a letters page in your newsletter or a discussion group on your website.

Invite representatives of different groups to your committee meetings.

iv. Reaching out to the wider community to stimulate an interest in the public realm. Societies will usually have agreed aims or objects, particularly if they are registered as charities and it is important that attention is paid to any declared aim to promote an interest or to educate people in, for example, design and planning matters. Think about how to do this. Some of the considerations already mentioned will apply to the method you adopt but it is important to develop a pro-active approach. Don't wait for the community to come to you but go out and talk to people from all backgrounds and age groups within your community.

Remember also that there are some legal requirements with which individuals and organisations *must* comply. These include, but are not limited to, the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, Race Relations Act 1976, and the proposed (as at May 2006) Equality Bill which will outlaw discrimination against lesbians and gay men in the provision of goods and services.

For more information, try the following websites:

Commission for Racial Equality	www.cre.org.uk
Equal Opportunities Commission	www.eoc.org.uk
Disability Rights Commission	www.drc-gb.org.uk
Stonewall (campaigns for lesbian and gay equality)	www.stonewall.org.uk